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Editorial: Something in the water

What is happening to the people of Flint, Michigan, is nothing less than an ongoing tragedy.

One of the most basic expectations of local, state and federal government is to provide basic services, like clean water, to citizens. It is clear Flint residents have been failed at every level by those hired to protect them.

By now, you've probably viewed photos and videos of the disgusting yellow water flowing from Flint taps. What you might not know, and what very few knew until recently, is officials knew for quite some time the children and adults of Flint were being poisoned with dangerous amounts of lead and other contaminants. And they did nothing.

After the financial collapse of Michigan's auto industry, Flint's emergency managers decided to save some money by converting the city's water supply to the polluted Flint River. Residents noticed an immediate change for the worse in what was coming out of their faucets. Foul-smelling, cloudy water with visible debris became the norm. According to a WJRT-TV report last month, leaked documents prove Environmental Protection Agency officials knew as far back as April 2015 this water was unsafe for anyone to drink.

What local leaders did was worse than just failing to act. They publicly

claimed there was no problem. Only after outside pressure came to bear did the city switch back to water from Detroit and issue water filters.

Why did Flint's leaders do this to those who pay their salaries? It was all to save a few bucks. But by cutting these corners, the guilty parties have ensured a much costlier mitigation will be in store. Millions upon millions will now have to be spent cleaning up.

This is a tragedy that will last for years to come. Lead in any amount is unsafe, and the youth of Flint will carry the unseen scars of this debacle for life.

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder has apologized and promised to release his emails related to the crisis. (So far, the documents released have been heavily redacted, including the entirety of the first email in the series.) President Barack Obama has declared a state of emergency. This is not good enough. These are empty words.

Those responsible need to be held civilly and criminally liable for their willing negligence. And the people of Flint need to be made whole for making the mistake of trusting their leaders.